



Pencil Marks on a Field

Form and Support in Late Soviet Participatory Performance by Collective Actions

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Fifteen participants stand in a snowy field on the outskirts of Moscow, a large black square of cloth laid out on the ground before them. A set of typed instructions invites them to yell as loudly as they can: "Pull!" As soon as they give the signal, someone "offstage" in the nearby forest begins pulling a rope that can now be seen snaking across the field and disappearing under the black cloth. The rope tightens, revealing a tape recorder in a clear plastic bag mounted on a small wooden sled and attached to the rope's tail end. For thirty-five minutes, the rope, the tape recorder, and eventually the black cloth itself slowly traverse the snow-white expanse and disappear into the forest, leaving the viewers alone in the field. Following this demonstration, the action's organizers distribute souvenirs in the form of squares of flocked black paper embellished with red corners and metallic railroad emblems like those found on train conductors' uniforms. This scene, staged by Collective Actions (CA) group on February 14, 1983, is titled *Zvukovye perspektivy poezdki za gorod* (Sound perspectives of a trip out of the city) (Kollektivnye deistviia 2011, 2–3:25).

Despite the simplicity of its plot, the action's material status is not easy to pin down. Do we locate it in the live event experienced by the participants in the field, or is it carried forward in some way in the laconic objects distributed at the event's conclusion? Does a description in the present tense, as I have rendered it above, capture some sense of the event's ephemerality, or does a sequence of photographs convey a more vivid sense of the event's unfolding temporality? Questions about the relationship between a viewer's perceptual apparatus, on the one hand, and performance documentation, on the other, have occupied researchers in the fields of art history and performance studies



Collective Actions, *Sound Perspectives of a Trip Out of the City*, documentary photograph. Courtesy of Andrei Monastyrski.

(Phelan [1993] 1996; O'Dell 1997; Jones 1997; Auslander 2006b). For Collective Actions, these questions have been at the heart of a many-decades-long practice since the mid-1970s.

The stakes of performance and its documentation extend beyond museological questions of cataloging and preservation. While performance encompasses a wide range of activities, in general it uses forms of temporal and bodily presence, photo, sound, and video documentation, as well as narrative forms such as the script and the audience's recollections, to reflect on fundamental questions of individual and collective life, public and private space, temporality, and the availability of events to interpretation, memory, and history. The shifting and proliferating formal parameters of CA's actions (including their various modes of documentation) offer a model of performance that unsettles the conventional relationship between the bounded aesthetic object and the boundless surround of everyday life. Enlisting the notions of form and support put forward by performance theorist Shannon Jackson, I challenge the widespread view that CA's enigmatic actions constituted a withdrawal into a hermetic world of formal structures, theoretical texts, and documentation.¹ In what follows, I offer a close reading of one fairly representative action in CA's corpus whose varied material forms, both performative and documentary, created spaces for individual and collective aesthetic experience at once within and outside of the mediated late Soviet lifeworld.

Collective Actions came together as a group of young artists and poets in the spring of 1976 to stage time-based participatory actions for groups of invited audiences on the outskirts of Moscow.² Inspired by Zen Buddhism and the compositions of John Cage, the series of actions CA conceived, entitled *Poezdki za gorod* (Trips out of the city), were part convivial field trips, part public poetry readings. But rather than reciting stanzas, the organizers invited viewers to observe or carry out simple acts, like walking, standing, reading, or listening, that concentrated attention and emphasized duration. At the same time, CA produced an abundance of documentation in the form of descriptive texts, photographs, diagrams, documentary certificates, and firsthand accounts from audience members, later compiled into a series of hand-bound volumes chronicling the group's activities.³ Over the years, the actions came to punctuate the artistic calendar of a circle of unofficial artists interested in contemporary art and conceptual aesthetics. The actions, postaction discussions, and editions of theory and documentation became key sites where Moscow Conceptualist ideas about aesthetics, the nature of viewership, and art's relationship to society were articulated and debated.

In the preface to the first of these documentary volumes, CA adopted a phenomenological approach, theorizing the action as a "demonstrational field" (*demonstratsionnoe pole*) on which the audience observes the movement of figures and objects as they appear, disappear, and change position on the field of action. In *Sound Perspectives*, for example, the demonstrational field initially consists of a black square on a white ground but soon expands to include the rope, the forest's edge, the audience's shouts of "Pull!", the passage of the tape recorder along the snowy field, and the withdrawal of the black square as it is dragged across the field and out of view. Each element in the action—each object and movement in the perceptual field, each instruction carried out—becomes, in the words of CA, a metaphorical "'pencil mark,' tracing the edges, zones, and relationships of the empty (pure) demonstrational 'field'" (Kollektivnye deistviia 2011, 1:12). As the action unfolds, each viewer's experience of events prompts reflection and interpretation, and the notion of the demonstrational field as a representation of these perceptions allows the organizers and participants to speak and speculate together about the meaning of what has taken place.

This temporally unfolding dialectic of direct experience and retrospective sense making drives CA's documentary impulse. Recording devices—photo and video cameras, tape recorders—document the proceedings, producing independent accounts of each action and extending the demonstrational field further into the realms of the photographic, the sonic, and the videographic: what

CA later termed "factographic discourse" (*faktograficheskii diskurs*).⁴ Not mere stand-ins for audience experience, these technical means capture aspects of the action unavailable to viewers and challenge the notion that immediate temporal and bodily presence takes priority over its recorded representations. In *Sound Perspectives*, the tape recorder had been switched on prior to the audience's arrival on the field to capture the ambient sounds of the viewers assembling, events to which no audience member had paid particular attention. The audio also captured and amplified the sound of the sled as it made its way across the frozen ground, its starts and stops as the rope became tangled or stuck, the wind as it whipped across the field and rustled the plastic bag protecting the recorder from the snow's moisture. Further emphasizing the independent nature of these recorded forms, Monastyrski combined the photographs and audio produced during *Sound Perspectives* with additional photographs and sounds captured in the Moscow metro and around the city into a multitrack audio slide show and screened it to an assembled audience at a group member's studio three weeks later. Rather than try to convey an accurate sense of the spatiotemporal experience of the field action, the slide show used blinking lights, serial forms, and the layering of sonic and visual materials to produce a new aesthetic reality that extended the demonstrational field and gave rise to its own sense of action (*deistvie*). A discussion of the slide show took place immediately after the screening, subjecting this new layer of aesthetic material to the process of interpretation.

Apparent in CA's drive to transform embodied experience into a kind of text-to-be-read is a romance of information, language, and structures, a preoccupation in line with widespread Soviet interests in cybernetics, structuralism, and the semiotic analysis of culture that burgeoned in the early 1960s (Jackson 2010, 34–37). The flat bureaucratic style of its typewritten texts and black-and-white photographs aligns CA firmly with the aesthetics of conceptual art from North America and Western Europe while referencing the "nonartistic," utilitarian aesthetic of 1920s constructivism. At the same time, the looming presence of the monochrome—the figure of the black square on a white field echoing Kazimir Malevich's iconic *Black Square* (1915)—alludes to a modernist legacy long suppressed by Soviet artistic authorities that rejected its mysticism in favor of an easily legible socialist realism.

What to make of this mixed bag of references? Within the history of modern and contemporary art, this emphasis on simple structures and abstract forms would seem to signal a turning away from the utopian incursion of art into life and toward a realm of hermetic discourse, pure theory, "the zero of form," in

Malevich's (1976, 118) words. As performance, CA's ritualized withdrawal from the spaces of everyday life in the city and meticulous collection of documentation appear to embrace the performance event as autonomous aesthetic form, divorced from daily practices and concerns. The course of each action becomes an ever-expanding "demonstrational field" that incorporates the unfolding of action and skirts the particulars of individual identity and social and political life. A key term for maintaining the autonomy of actions within CA's theories is "empty action," the notion that at the center of each of CA's actions is a maneuver by which the viewer is invited to witness the action but "'intensely does not understand' or 'incorrectly understands' what is taking place" (*Kollektivnye deistviia* 2011, 1:11). This space of engaged attention and directed, immediate perception is revealed as empty action only after its conclusion, when discussion and interpretation begin. In the complex temporality of this recursive form, the group sees an opening for the "liberation of consciousness" (1:10). By this account, liberation is not the achievement of political objectives but the liberation from political objectives as such. For members of the Moscow Conceptualist circle, this detached vision of performance was also, among other things, expedient because it ensured they would not be mistaken for dissidents rather than artists on a par with their Western peers. Soviet authorities would detect no anti-Soviet propaganda in these inexplicable operations in nature, and Western art critics would not leap to identify in them the pathos of down-trodden subjects of Soviet repression.

The model of performance that I have sketched out so far is one that conforms to CA's own account of its actions as an aesthetic practice of defamiliarization that "makes strange the perception of ordinary appearance, disappearance, recession, light, sound, etc." (*Kollektivnye deistviia* 2011, 1:16). There is, however, another model of performance that I would like to propose that takes as its object not just the pencil marks on the demonstrational field but also the living context and support structures that made and make CA's works and world possible, in other words, the messy context of artistic practice. We see glimpses of it beyond the black square of cloth, flocked paper, and darkened slide show screen. Looking more closely at the array of documentary photographs, we can discern not only distant figures moving in deliberate trajectories across the snow but close shots of the organizers setting up the action. We see CA members Andrei Monastyrski and Elena Elagina preparing the tape recorder for its journey across the field, Elagina's hand-knitted hat reminding us of the everyday economy of care that made up for the shortage of Soviet consumer goods in the 1970s and 1980s. Monastyrski is midsentence, and Elagina reaches out

her hand as though to touch whatever momentary problem may have arisen with the sled. Another shot captures the audience standing in position, laughing, not just a collectivity of bodies sited in an aesthetic relation but friends and acquaintances sharing a pleasant afternoon.⁵ In her interdisciplinary study of performance by theater practitioners and visual artists working in the field of "social practice," theorist Shannon Jackson makes the case for broadening our lens on performance beyond the "autonomous performance event" to take into account "its heteronomous environment." "What if," she asks, "the formal parameters of the form include the audience relation, casting such inter-subjective exchange, not as the extraneous context that surrounds it, but as the material of performance itself? What if performance challenges strict divisions about where the art ends and the rest of the world begins?" (Jackson 2011, 15). For Jackson, the form of performance is not merely made possible by the support and coordination of people and institutions, but indeed augmented by them in an aesthetic relation. In this light, CA's photographs can be seen to serve multiple functions: they document the event, they extend the demonstrational field into photographic space, and, importantly, they circulate among the close-knit circle of group members, participants, and guests, taking the place of traditional institutional forms of art criticism and publicity not normally available to unofficial Soviet artists. In them, we see the everyday acts and social conditions that made Soviet performance possible.

Audience recollections serve similarly multiple functions. Spoken into tape recorders immediately after an action or composed later, these recollections form one of the component parts of *Trips out of the City* and sometimes serve as the aesthetic material for further work (e.g., as voice-over material in the slide show for *Sound Perspectives*). However, the stories told in these recollections are often also stories about social relationships. An example:

Today, February 13, 1983, I, Vasilii Glebovich Makarevich, participated in a happening called *Sound Perspectives of a Trip Out of the City*. Today at twelve o'clock, my wife and I and a group of my comrades and friends met at the Riga Railroad Station. We boarded a commuter train almost entirely filled with people. In the course of the journey people kept boarding and boarding. These were mostly skiers. The ride lasted around 20 minutes. We got off on the platform at Opalikha. . . . At first, we walked through shallow snow, but the farther from the platform we went, the deeper the snow became. Our small group consisted of fifteen people stretched out in a single file. I felt like I was walking in a wolf pack, as I tried to step in the footprints in front of me. Our single file was a column approximately

fifty feet in length, everyone differently and colorfully dressed. We walked for about fifteen minutes until we reached an area of trampled-down snow where the equipment for the happening was already laid out. My brother was there with his wife and Masha Konstantinova. (*Kollektivnye deistviia* 2011, 2–3:46)⁶

The author of this recollection, the brother of one of the members of CA, was himself neither a practicing artist nor a regular of the Moscow Conceptualist circle. His testimony, however, was solicited and included, just as was his participation in the field, among the materials relevant to the interpretation of the action. Vasilii Makarevich's discussion of events leading up to the action and details like the passenger train and the sensation of being in a wolf pack seem extraneous to the action's formal aspects. But they should not be read as the testimony of the uninitiated, a stranger to the language and criteria of art. On the contrary, the difference in style of the audience recollections from that of the rest of the documentary texts, which all but erase individual subjectivity, relationships, and the wider social context, reintroduces such concerns into the aesthetic fabric of CA's practice. One consequence of taking seriously Shannon Jackson's notion of support is that it helps us to reimagine the author/audience relationship. Indeed, CA insisted on calling its audience members "viewer-participants" (*uchastniki-zriteli*), emphasizing the collaborative nature of the practice, and Monastyrski has insisted that despite his authoring the majority of the group's actions and theoretical texts, CA can only be understood as a collective, since without the regular involvement of viewer-participants none of the actions could have taken place.⁷

In insisting on the interdependence of form and support in performance, Jackson recognizes the risk that an artwork "find itself 'governed' by the 'external' claims of communities, special interests, audiences, governments, bureaucracies, and other social entities from whom it must properly stand apart" (2011, 15). Anxiety over the instrumentalization of culture by political interests and the culture industry runs through the history of modernism and flashes up in debates over performance, particularly in the notion of spectacle. As already mentioned, unofficial Soviet artists were especially vulnerable to a narrow binary discourse of freedom and resistance, artistic autonomy and politicization—what Alexei Yurchak (2005, 4–8) calls "binary socialism." CA's withdrawal into nature and embrace of phenomenology and structuralism may be seen as a means to resist legibility and easy categorization. It is important, however, not to fall into the same binary thinking by reading CA's work as claiming artistic autonomy divorced from social context and historical location. After all, if a

lack of institutional structures to support contemporary art prompted CA and the Moscow Conceptualist circle to develop a complex critical discourse, other conditions of socialist life, such as the abundance of free time, the availability of public transport and free public space, and even the values of close friendship and sincerity, enabled the group's enduring performative practice. CA signals the presence of these conditions in its characteristically understated way. In *Sound Perspectives*, explicit signs of Soviet reality in the form of the metallic military railroad symbols attached to the souvenir objects and images and sounds of approaching commuter trains included in the slide show neither celebrate Soviet industry nor disavow or ironize it. In the semiotic economy of the slide show, parallel structures emerge: the departing tape recorder disappears in the distance while a commuter train arrives, growing to fill the screen. The snowy field on the edge of the city is chiastically transmuted into the site of urban transport and circulation, forms of institutional support for CA's collective journeys. The city is figured as another potential field. Empty action and the demonstrational field can no sooner escape Soviet reality than Monastyrski or Elagina could cease to live in late Soviet Moscow in 1983.

In his study of late Soviet culture, Yurchak (2005, 126–57) posits a location he calls *vnye*, at once inside and outside of official or authoritative discourse. Living *vnye* meant adhering to official forms of behavior and language while imbuing them with one's own meanings, and it allowed many different people in late socialism to take up “styles of living [that] generated multiple new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were fully made possible by it” (128). At one point in the slide show from *Sound Perspectives*, an image flashes on the screen of a character Monastyrski calls “Dyshu i slyshu” (I breathe and I hear). The figure is wearing the high ponytail of a Taoist monastic and the black overcoat and metallic lapel pins of a station master or military officer. He is seated in a snowy forest bent over a black box from which a set of white tubes emerges, plugged into the figure's nose and ears. The audio track at this point consists of two channels: the sounds captured by the tape recorder gliding across the field and an even, rhythmic breathing. The image suggests a closed loop of living (breathing) and perceiving (listening), localized in the figure who serves as his own actor and audience, the metabolic function between the two states mediated by the black box. “I Breathe and I Hear” is an embodiment of living *vnye*: the integration of life and art, the meditating station master, the aesthetic form (black box, empty action, pure sound) animated by and made possible through the support (breathing) and attention (listening) of the figure in the field.



Andrei Monastyrski, "I Breathe and I Hear," 1983. Photograph included in the slide show for *Sound Perspectives of a Trip Out of the City*. Courtesy of Andrei Monastyrski.

NOTES

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1. This view was most vocally espoused by a young generation of artists in the early 1980s, but it also occasionally appears in more recent art historical accounts of the group. See, for example, Tupitsyn (1989, 99); Esanu (2013, 118–22).

2. CA's original members were Andrei Monastyrski, Nikita Alekseev, George Kieselwaller, and Nikolai Panitkov, with others joining later.

3. Titled *Poezdki za gorod* (Trips out of the city), these have since been published, most recently in *Kollektivnye deistviia* (2011) and online at <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS.htm>.

4. For more on factographic discourse, see *Kollektivnye deistviia* (2011, 2:8–16); and Kalinsky (2013).

5. These and other photographs from *Sound Perspectives of a Trip Out of the City* can be found online at <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-21.htm>.

6. For more on CA's audience recollections and for translations of recollections from 1976 to 1981, see Kalinsky (2012).

7. Monastyrski, in conversation with the author.